

**A Review of K-12 ESL Education in  
Alberta**

**STUDY SYNOPSIS**

April 2006

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## ALBERTA EDUCATION CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Howard Research & Management Consulting Inc.

A review of K-12 ESL education in Alberta : study synopsis.

ISBN 0-7785-5156-3

1. English language – Study and teaching – Alberta. 2. English language – Study and teaching – Alberta – Foreign speakers. I. Title.  
II. Alberta. Alberta Education.

PE1128.A2.H851 2006

372.6521

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### **This document is intended primarily for:**

System and School Administrators  
Alberta Education Executive Team and Managers

### **And may be of interest to:**

Teachers  
Parents  
Education Stakeholders  
Community Members

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## INTRODUCTION

Between October 2004 and September 2005 Howard Research & Management Consulting Inc. was contracted by Alberta Learning<sup>1</sup> to conduct a needs assessment study to identify the current state of affairs with respect to K-12 English as a Second Language (ESL) in Alberta, Canada. The study was commissioned to improve understanding of the factors that influence and possibly predict the academic success of ESL students in order to assist the Ministry with decisions related to curriculum development, resource allocation, and support provision to ESL students. The value of the study lies in learning what optimal supports and strategies are required to maximize the educational achievements of ESL students.

The comprehensive nature of this study is unique in that it presents the state of affairs of K-12 ESL education in Alberta. Best practice information is drawn from principals and teachers at various grade levels and geographic locations across the province. Views of experts and other stakeholders and research evidence have been considered in light of longitudinal data on ESL student achievement. Finally, a synthesis of findings has culminated in identification of factors and predictors of academic achievement of ESL students. A set of recommendations is offered as a starting point for the development of an action plan for K-12 ESL in Alberta.

## BACKGROUND

The current <sup>2</sup>ESL (English as a Second Language) student population in Alberta is estimated at 37,300. Based on Citizenship and Immigration Canada data, there are approximately 1,500 new arrivals to Alberta between the ages of 0 to 18 each month<sup>3</sup>. The number of ESL students has been increasing by an average of 14% per year. New arrivals settle predominantly in Calgary (58% new arrivals) and in Edmonton (29% new arrivals), with the remainder scattered throughout the province. Funding for Alberta Education has established three codes, 301, 302 and 303. According to the 2005-2006 Funding Manual for School Authorities the following definitions are used:

- 301 – Foreign-born funded ESL students
- 303 – Canadian-born funded ESL students
- 302 – Non-funded ESL students<sup>4</sup>

## METHOD

Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used to conduct this study, including a comprehensive literature review. Eight case studies examined current practices related to funding, assessment, program delivery, completion of PATs (Provincial Achievement Tests) and DEs (Diploma Exams), influencers on social adjustment of ESL students, facilitators and barriers to implementing best practices, early leaving, leadership, and recommendations for priority action. Semi-structured

<sup>1</sup> Alberta Learning was split into Alberta Education and Alberta Advanced Education during this study.

<sup>2</sup> Based on September 2005 count.

<sup>3</sup> This estimate is based on 2003 IMM1000 data which indicated 1,320 new arrivals per month. An estimated 14% increase was applied to this rate. This includes primary migration patterns only.

<sup>4</sup> International students on study permit were not included in any analyses.



interviews were conducted with 47 stakeholder/experts, and a province-wide survey of principals and teachers was used to gather descriptive information on current practices.

The purpose of the province-wide school survey was to gather both descriptive information regarding the current state of affairs in schools across the province with respect to ESL student programming. In addition, the school survey was used in combination with data obtained from Information Services to analyze the relationships between school-level predictors and ESL student achievement of success.

A staged random selection approach was used to select schools for participation in the K-12 ESL school survey. There are four grade cohorts used in this study: grades 10-12 (Division 4), grades 7-9 (Division 3), grades 4-6 (Division 2) and grades K-3 (Division 1). A total of 1,072 schools representing the four grade cohorts were asked to complete the teacher and principal surveys. Response rates ranged from 53% to 57% across the four cohorts. School-based data were then combined with data from Alberta Education to identify relationships between school-level predictors and ESL student achievement on Provincial Achievement Tests/Diploma Exams.

For descriptive purposes, analyses of school survey data consisted of cross-tabulations. For school-level predictive analyses, data collected at the school level were directly merged with data from Alberta Education and regression analyses were conducted on the combined data. For ESL student analyses, data provided by Information Services were also analyzed using a regression approach.

### Limitations

There are several limitations with a study of this type.

- First, all relationships that are identified are co-relational in nature and not causal. It is important to emphasize that though some causal relationships are more plausible than others, it is important that all relationships be viewed within the context of the qualitative data collected as well as the literature.
- Second, the sample sizes associated with some outcome measures were less than ideal. As a result of the lower retention rates of ESL students in the school system and lower rates of completion on Provincial Achievement Tests/Diploma Exams (PAT/DEs), the effects associated with achievement levels should be interpreted with caution, particularly at the senior high level.
- Third, variability in the number of ESL students across schools resulted in inadequate sample sizes within schools to estimate regression parameters using hierarchical linear modeling. As a result, school-level data were merged to the individual outcome data (Information Systems data) using the school code as a merge variable. It should be noted that this approach tends to overestimate the predictive effects of the school context variables. Given these limitations it is important to examine the predictive results, particularly those involving school based predictors, in terms of trends across cohort groups or across similar predictor themes. It is also important to consider the size of a particular predictive effect in addition to statistical significance.





- The funding models have changed over the last years, from three year caps, to four year caps and more recently to a five year cap. It is not possible to account for these changes in the longitudinal predictive analyses that were conducted. It is possible that these changes may have confounded some of the results obtained.
- There may be variability in how jurisdictions are interpreting the 302 funding code. It is uncertain if this is being used to identify international students, previously funded ESL students who are no longer funded or some other unique application.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

### **ESL Student Population**

On average, respondent schools reported that 17% of their school population was ESL-- 34% with 1 to 5 ESL students, 39% with 6 to 25 ESL students, and 26% with more than 25 ESL students<sup>5</sup>. The proportion of Canadian-born ESL students steadily decreases with grade level. Only in the K-3 category are more Canadian-born ESL students reported than foreign-born. Overall, 5% of ESL students are refugees.

### **Assessment of English Language Proficiency**

Schools reported using over 60 different assessment instruments, the most common being the Developmental Reading Assessment test (K-6), the Woodcock Munoz (7-9), and the Secondary Level English Proficiency test (10-12). Stakeholders/experts expressed general dissatisfaction with existing tools. They emphasized the need for tools normed on Alberta students, and for consistent intake assessment to facilitate common placement practices. Experts emphasized the significant influence that proficiency in first language has on the ESL student's ability to learn English. Across all grade cohorts, 43% of schools reported collecting information about ESL students' first languages.

### **Leadership**

Besides respect for the first language and heritage culture of ESL students, research indicates the importance of ensuring an environment for first language support. Experts and practitioners alike expressed that instructional leadership (knowledge of second language acquisition and instruction) and development of strategies that support teachers in their efforts to improve instructional capacity demonstrate good leadership practice.

### **Instructional Models**

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that only those schools with at least one ESL student were asked to participate in the survey. Seventeen percent (17%) is reflective of the participating sample and not intended to represent the number of ESL students in Alberta as a whole.



Research supports transitional programs (sheltered, pull-out, adjunct, inclusive) sustained for a period of five or more years. Research also indicates that full integration of ESL students into mainstream classes, if done too early, can be detrimental to achievement of ESL students. (Thomas & Collier, 2002). Further, pull-out programs (several weeks to several months duration) are most beneficial to newcomer students who have little or no English, for ESL students who are older than their grade level peers, or who are at risk of dropping out of school.

Case study data indicate that integration of ESL students into mainstream classes with pull-out support is the most common model of instruction in current use. Sheltered classrooms are the norm in large schools with large numbers of ESL students as well as in the Kanadier<sup>6</sup> program in a smaller elementary school in rural Alberta. Survey results indicate that sixty-four percent (64%) of schools reported using in-class models of instruction. Pull-out classes with school-based teachers (20%) was the second most commonly-reported model of instruction for ESL students. Experts' views differed on the merits of various models of instruction. Fully integrated and pull-out models were both recognized as valuable and important, but perspectives on the timing and duration of pull-out varied.

### **Pre-service and In-service Requirements**

On average, 63% of schools reported that staff designated to instruct ESL students have some ESL training (possibly as little as one professional development session). Twenty-seven (27%) of ESL designated teachers have no ESL training. Only 14% of schools reported that ESL designated teachers had an ESL diploma, certificate or degree in ESL.

### **Reasons for ESL Students Leaving School Early**

ESL students leave early primarily because of lack of time to complete high school, frustration, low self-esteem, and family responsibilities.

## **PREDICTORS OF ESL STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

An overall description of the ESL student types and comparisons to non-ESL students are provided in Appendix A to establish how ESL students in Alberta fair in comparison to the non-ESL student population. In general, these tables indicate that non-ESL students tend to maintain enrolment in the Alberta Education system, are more likely to be moved forward with their age peers, are more likely to complete PAT/DEs, and achieve at higher levels than ESL students at most grade levels.

In the following sections, results focus on predictive relationships among the ESL student population. It is important to note that relative to non-ESL students, ESL students are, in general, at a disadvantage when it comes to success outcomes regardless of the individual and school characteristics described below.

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<sup>6</sup> A fully segregated program for Mennonite students which focuses on math and English and offers bible study as well.



## Individual Level Predictors of Success

Overall the predictive results that focus on individual level variables (rather than school level contextual variables) indicate several key findings when viewed across the four success outcomes of: a) remaining within the Alberta Education system, b) moving forward in the system with age peers, c) PAT/DE completion rates, and d) PAT/DE achievement levels. The key findings are summarized in Table ES1 below.

Table ES1. Synthesis of Individual Level Predictors among ESL Students

OUTCOMES → PREDICTORS	Remaining in Alberta System	Moving Forward with Age Peers	PAT/DE Completions	PAT/DE Achievement
Canadian born (in comparison to foreign born)	↓ (12)*	↓ (9, 12)	↓ (9, 12)	↓ (3, 6, 9, 12)
More years as 301 student	↑ (3, 9, 12)	↑ (12)		
More years as 302 student	↓ (9, 12)	↓ (9, 12)	↓ (9)	↓ (9)
More years as 303 student	↓ (9, 12)		↓ (9)	↓ (3, 6, 9)
Number of years former ESL funded (301 or 302) student has been in system as non funded	↓ (6, 9, 12)	↓ (12)	↑ (9, 12)	↑ (6, 9, 12)
Delay between entering the system and being identified as ESL	↓ (12)		↓ (9, 12)	↓ (9)
Later age at entry into Alberta system	↑ (12)	↑ (12)	↓ (12)	↑ (9M) ↓ (12E)
Later grade at entry in Alberta system	↑ (9, 12)	↑ (9, 12)	↓ (3, 12)	↑ (9M) ↓ (12E)
Females (in comparison to males)				↑ (3, 6, 9E)
Probability of limited first language proficiency		↓ (9)	↓ (9)	↓ (3) ↑ (12E)
Probability of having special needs		↓ (9, 12)	↓ (3, 12)	↓ (6, 12)
Probability of requiring trauma counselling			↓ (12)	
Probability of lower English proficiency level				↓ (3, 6)
Probability of refugee status				↓ (9, 12)

Overall trends are described (grades where effects are stronger are identified). M=Math, E=English

\* The arrows indicate the direction of the effect and are interpreted from predictor to outcome. For example for the first cell entry, the effect is read: In comparison to foreign-born, Canadian born students are less likely (↓) to remain in the Alberta Education system in the grade 12 cohort.

### Predictor: ESL Student Type

**Key Findings** In comparison to foreign-born ESL students, Canadian-born ESL students are at a greater disadvantage when it comes to remaining within the Alberta Education system, completing PATs, and achieving on PATs. The differences between foreign- and Canadian-born students are greatest at the junior and senior high levels. In addition, the longer students are coded as Canadian-born ESL students (code 303) the greater the disadvantage grows. Similarly, the longer students are identified as non-funded ESL students (code 302), the more likely they are to be disadvantaged when it comes to remaining within the Alberta Education system, moving forward in the system with age peers, completing PATs, and achieving on PATs. This is particularly true at the junior high level. In contrast, the longer students are coded as foreign-born ESL students (code 301) the more



likely they are to remain within the Alberta Education system and move forward in the system with their peers, particularly in the later grades.

Possible Explanation/Implication: While further research is required, these findings suggest that Canadian-born ESL students may be experiencing more chronic language deficiencies than foreign-born ESL students. While foreign-born students remain at a disadvantage in comparison to non-ESL students, their language deficiencies may be more acute upon entry into the system, but become less profound (in comparison to Canadian-born ESL students) as they progress through the system.

**Predictor: Termination of Funded Status**

**Key Findings** The longer it has been since ESL students have had their funding terminated the less likely they are to remain within the Alberta Education system and move forward in the system with their age peers. However, there is also a positive relationship between the length of time ESL students have had their funding terminated and the higher their level of PAT/DE achievement.

Possible Explanation/Implication: ESL students whose English proficiency is at a sufficiently high level before their funding is terminated have a greater likelihood of moving successfully through school with their age peers and achieving well on PAT/DEs. However, when the English proficiency level of an ESL student is not at an adequate level before funding is terminated, the student is more likely to be retained or drop out.

**Predictor: Delay in ESL Student Identification**

**Key Findings** The longer the delay in identification of ESL status the less likely students will remain within the Alberta Education system, the less likely students will complete PATs and the lower the students' achievement levels. These effects are found largely at the junior and senior high levels.

Possible Explanation/Implication: These results indicate that early identification is important for the long-term retention of ESL students.

**Predictor: Age at Entry / Grade at Entry**

**Key Findings** Students entering the system at an older age and/or are admitted to a more advanced grade are more likely to remain in the Alberta Education system and are more likely to move forward in the system with their age peers but less likely to complete their PAT/DEs than those entering at a younger age. When it comes to PAT/DE achievement levels, those entering at an older age and/or admitted to a more advanced grade level achieve higher levels in math, but lower levels in English than those entering at an earlier age and/or grade level.



*Possible Explanation/Implication:* Results suggest that older age students or students admitted in a more advanced grade are more likely to be placed with their age peers though they are less likely to have the English proficiency to complete PAT/DEs. Older students are likely entering the system with more advanced mathematics skills as a result of mathematics instruction in their first language.

**Predictor: Other ESL Student Characteristics**

**Key Findings** Generally speaking, ESL students with a higher probability of having limited first language proficiency, special needs, lower English proficiency levels, or refugee status experience more deficits across one or more achievement outcomes (i.e., remaining in the school system, moving forward their age peers, completing PATs/DEs, achieving on PATs/DEs) and/or across one or more grade cohorts.

*Possible Explanation/Implication:* The results suggest that those students with limited first language proficiency, special needs, lower English proficiency levels, or having refugee status may require additional ESL instructional supports.

### School Level Predictors of Improved Achievement

The predictive results that focus on variables within the school environment (e.g., instructional methods, school size) focused only on improved achievement over successive PAT examinations. Because baseline information does not exist for early elementary grades, contextual relationships could not be assessed at those grade levels. Also, due to a small sample size for the grade 12 cohort (fewer than 100), it was decided the results were too unstable to warrant discussion. The key findings are summarized in the Table ES2 below.

Table ES2. Synthesis of School Level Predictors

PREDICTORS	Improved Achievement
Larger school size	↑ (6, 9)*
Higher ESL staff qualifications, training and/or specialization	↑ (6, 9)
Supports	
Availability of interpreters/translators	↑ (6, 9)
Additional teaching and support staff	↑ (6, 9)
ESL resource materials (including first language)	↑ (6, 9)
Availability of Reception Centre	↑ (6)
ESL consultants and other professionals	↑ (6)
Tutor support	↑ (9)
ESL teams and team functioning	↑ (6, 9)
Class Organization (Instructional Model)	
Half-day self-contained	↓ (6)
In-class ESL support	↑ (9)
Pull-out	↑ (9-E) ↓ (9-M)
Student Grouping	
Group students by age	↑ (6, 9)
Group students by English language proficiency	↑ (6)
Group students by proficiency in their first language	↓ (6)
ESL Timetabling	
Unstructured timetabling	↓ (9-E) ↑ (9-M)
Semi-structured timetabling	↑ (9)





Structured timetabling	↑ (6) ↓ (9)
Instructional Methods	
Mentoring approaches	↑ (6)
Integrated language and content instruction	↑ (9)
Modification approaches	↑ (9)
Balanced Literacy	↓ (6) ↑ (9)
Realia <sup>7</sup> (Real Life)	↓ (6)
Language Experience	↓ (6, 9)
Phonemic Awareness	↓ (6, 9)
Diagnostic Assessment Depth and Quality	↑ (6, 9)
School Communication Support of ESL Students	↑ (9)

Overall trends are described (grades where effects are stronger are identified). M=Math, E=English.

\* The arrows indicate the direction of the effect and are interpreted from predictor to outcome. For example, for the first cell entry, the effect is read: in comparison to smaller schools, larger schools have student that show a greater (↑) improvement in achievement than in grades 6 and 9.

#### Predictor: **School Size**

**Key Findings** In comparison to those ESL students in schools with smaller student populations, ESL students in schools with larger student populations, at the elementary and junior high levels, demonstrate greater improvements in achievement.

#### Predictor: **Staff Qualifications, Training and/or Specialization**

**Key Findings** Results indicate that ESL teachers with more training, credentials and specialization are more effective in supporting ESL student achievement.

#### Predictor: **ESL Supports**

**Key Findings** The availability of interpreters/translators, additional teaching and support staff, and ESL resource materials, benefit ESL students at the later elementary and junior high levels. ESL students in later elementary grades also benefit from the availability of a Reception Centre, ESL consultants, and other professionals. Junior high ESL students benefit from the availability of tutor supports.

#### Predictor: **Class Organization (Instructional Model)**

**Key Findings** A half-day self-contained (sheltered) class model may be the least appropriate for ESL students in later elementary grades. Students in schools using this model show deterioration in math achievement. For junior high students a pull-out, school-based model was related to improvement in English achievement but deterioration in math achievement. In-class support for ESL students in junior high, on the other hand, was not related to improvement in English achievement, but was positively related to improvement in math achievement.

#### Predictor: **Student Grouping**

**Key Findings** Schools that group ESL students by age have students who show improved achievement levels in later elementary grades and junior high. At the later elementary grade level, grouping students by English language proficiency also appears to have beneficial effects on

<sup>7</sup> Descriptions of Realia, Balanced Literacy and other approaches are outlined in the Calgary Board of Education Benchmarks document.



achievement. In addition, grouping students by proficiency in first language appears to be related to deterioration in achievement levels at the later elementary grade level.

**Predictor: Timetabling**

**Key Findings** ESL students in later elementary grades may benefit most from a structured timetabling approach since a positive relation with achievement in math is indicated. At the junior high level, an unstructured timetabling approach appears to be related to improvements in math achievement but deterioration in English. In junior high, a semi-structured approach appears to be related to improvement in English achievement, while a structured timetabling approach appears to be related to deterioration in math achievement.

**Predictor: Instructional Methods**

**Key Findings** ESL students in later grades in elementary schools that use mentoring instructional approaches show improved achievement in math and/or English—as opposed to schools where Balanced Literacy, Language Experience, Phonemic Awareness, and/or Realia approaches are used<sup>8</sup>. At the junior high level, schools that use Balanced Literacy, Integrated Language, Content Instruction, and modification approaches (as opposed to Language Experience and Phonemic Awareness approaches) have ESL students who show improved achievement levels in math and/or English.

**Predictor: Diagnostic and Assessment Characteristics**

**Key Findings** Overall, the quality and depth of diagnostics and assessment applied to ESL students is predictive of improved achievement outcomes in both English and math across the different grade cohorts. In addition, the number of data elements collected to understand ESL students' current and historical demographic profile was predictive of improved academic achievement level in English in junior high.

**Predictor: School Communication Support of ESL Parents**

**Key Findings** The ability of schools to provide information to parents of ESL students using first language or simple English is predictive of improved English achievement of ESL students at the junior high level.

Implications

Results suggest that to enhance the achievement of ESL students, access to qualified and trained ESL teachers, and appropriate levels and types of support are required. In addition, achievement of ESL students may be enhanced if schools use thorough diagnostic and assessment processes and support communication with parents of ESL students.

With respect to models of instruction (e.g., sheltered, integrated), it appears that no one model of instruction supports optimal achievement of ESL students. ESL students would

<sup>8</sup> The Calgary Board of Education's English as a Second Language: English Language Proficiency Benchmarks (2005) provides a summary description of the instructional methods discussed in this report.





benefit most from integrated classroom models during the school day, supplemented with additional hours of sheltered instruction to increase English proficiency. Results appear to support grouping by age. A structured timetabling approach appears most appropriate for ESL students at the elementary grade level, a semi-structured timetabling approach for ESL students at the junior high level, and an unstructured timetabling approach for ESL students with higher levels of English proficiency.

Mentoring approaches appear to be effective at the elementary grade levels. Instructional methods that appear to be related to deterioration in achievement in either or both of math/English at the elementary level are those that tend to rely on less structured approaches (i.e., Balanced Literacy, Language Experience and Realia). At the junior high level, results indicate that Balanced Literacy, Integrated Language and Content Instruction, and modification approaches may be most effective. Language Experience, and Phonemic Awareness approaches may be least effective on improved achievement in English and/or math.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS**

Study participants were asked to identify recommendations to address the needs of ESL students. These included experts/stakeholders, case study participants, and school principals who participated in the province-wide survey. Some of their recommendations are also supported in the literature and by predictor variables and they include the following:

1. Appropriate assessment tests for ESL students including psychological tests
2. Formalized assessment processes for ESL students
3. Standards for teaching requirements for teachers of ESL students
4. Collaborative research agenda with universities
5. Standardized program guidelines for ESL including junior high
6. Equitable support for all ESL students (those integrated into mainstream classes as well as those in segregated programs such as the Kanadier program)
7. Development of support programs for parents and students to work on at home
8. Revised funding structure for ESL relative to student need
9. Increased funding support for ESL (hiring of trained teachers and assistants, psychological assessment of ESL students, full-time ESL designated teachers, teacher training/professional development)
10. Maintained support for ESL students after they leave segregated ESL programs
11. Creation of a research and development team within the Ministry of Alberta Education
12. Collaboration with universities to offer more ESL programs in teacher education programs
13. Support for a cross-ministerial response to address the needs of ESL students
14. Increased parent involvement/voice in schools
15. Support for information sharing across jurisdictions
16. Maintained communication between Reception Centres and schools
17. Development of assessment processes for ESL students with learning disabilities



18. Effort to reduce attrition of ESL students

## CONSULTANT RECOMMENDATIONS

Howard Research makes the following recommendations:

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ALBERTA EDUCATION

#### Recommendation #1 – Re-examine the current funding structure for K-12 ESL.

##### Rationale:

Predictive analyses conducted in this study indicate that the longer it has been since funding for ESL students has been terminated, the less likely they are to remain in the Alberta Education school system and at grade level if they are still in the school system. ESL students do not complete Provincial Achievement Tests with the same frequency or level of success as their English-proficient peers. Data from case studies and experts/stakeholders indicate that ESL students who enter the system at junior and senior high ages experience significant challenges to learning English and completing diploma requirements within the five-year window of additional funding support. Data from the predictive analyses also suggest that those students with limited first language proficiency, special needs, lower English proficiency levels, or having refugee status may require additional ESL instructional supports.

A more flexible approach needs to be developed to determine appropriate level of funding to match level of proficiency in English that also takes into account other influencing factors such as socioeconomic status, years of prior formal schooling, and proficiency in first language.

Note: Recommendation #1 is supported by Study Participants' Recommendations #6, #8 and #10.

#### Recommendation #2 – Develop a recommended list of diagnostic and assessment instruments appropriate for use with ESL students to improve consistency and standardization in assessing, interpreting and reporting test results.

##### Rationale:

Predictive analysis findings indicate that schools that report using high quality English proficiency diagnostic and assessment tests, along with comprehensive tracking processes, have ESL students who demonstrate greater gains in academic achievement. A recommended list of diagnostic and assessment instruments would help to achieve accurate and consistent placement of ESL students across jurisdictions. To facilitate determination of the impact of various instructional strategies on achievement of ESL students, a core set of information needs to be collected uniformly over time – preferably electronically.



Data collected in this study indicate great variability with respect to tools and processes used to assess English proficiency of ESL students as well as in the type and depth of information collected on ESL students. A general gap in quality instruments normed on Alberta students is reported.

Note: Recommendation #2 is supported by Study Participants' Recommendations #1, #2, #15 and #17.

### **Recommendation #3 – Develop K-12 ESL proficiency standards and guidelines for instructional strategies articulated with the Alberta Program of Studies.**

#### Rationale:

Predictive analysis findings from this study indicate that schools that report using structured methods of instruction for ESL students have ESL students who demonstrate greater gains in academic achievement. Few schools reported having comprehensive plans for ESL instruction. Case study schools, experts and stakeholders reported concern about lack of a province-wide curriculum for K-12 ESL. Junior high is seen as a particular gap.

Foundational and seminal work in ESL is underway in some school jurisdictions with respect to ESL instruction and benchmarking student progress. Alberta Education and school jurisdictions can build on this existing work to develop guidelines and suggested approaches and strategies for ESL instruction that are articulated across grade levels and linked to the Alberta Program of Studies. Resource support for development and implementation of the guidelines will be required at both provincial and jurisdictional levels.

Note: Recommendation #3 is supported by Study Participants' Recommendations #5. This recommendation is also supported by Alberta's Commission on Learning recommendation #52: Create provincial proficiency standards for assessing ESL students, students who are not proficient in English, and French language upgrading students, and provide funding until students reach the standard.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL JURISDICTIONS**

### **Recommendation #4 – Ensure that K-12 ESL students have sufficient support and time to learn English and subject matter content.**

#### Rationale:

Previous research indicates that 5 to 7 years are required for ESL students to gain full proficiency in English. While conversational English can be learned fairly quickly, it takes much longer to learn cognitive skills. If a single model of instruction is used, an integrated model appears most supportive of ESL student achievement in English and math. Sheltered models appear inappropriate at the elementary level and may lead to deterioration in math. At the junior high level, pull-out models appear to lead to



improvement in English but deterioration in math, while in-class support models appear to lead to improvement in math but deterioration in English.

Previous research also indicates that instruction in the ESL student's first language (L1) supports acquisition of the second language (L2). In order for a student whose first language is English to gain proficiency in a second language, 1.5 to 4.5 hours of instruction per week are required (doubling that amount if advanced proficiency is desired). ESL students in Alberta schools could benefit from instruction in their first language. However, introducing the range of first languages of ESL students into the school day would have significant impact on resources and timetabling. Elongating the school day to provide more time for students to learn both English and subject matter content would likely have similar impact. Therefore, other alternatives need to be explored such as classes for ESL students held during the summer months or weekends. Jurisdictions should also explore ways in which they could work more closely with community-based agencies and organizations to create formal and informal opportunities for ESL students to learn and maintain their first language in environments that support their interaction with age peers and adults beyond their own immediate families.

Note: Recommendation #4 is supported by Study Participants' Recommendations #6, #8 and #10.

#### **Recommendation #5 – Provide more professional development opportunities for practicing teachers and teacher assistants.**

##### Rationale:

Predictive analysis findings from this study indicate that a positive relationship exists between more highly qualified and trained staff and improvements in achievement in ESL students. Research also supports this finding. Currently, schools report that 64% of mainstream teachers who teach ESL students have no training in ESL. Only 14% of schools reported that ESL designated teachers have a diploma, certificate or degree in ESL.

Professional development programs for practicing teachers and teacher assistants need to be developed in collaboration with universities, colleges, and training institutes to develop a comprehensive and articulated in-service program that leads to certification in ESL (e.g., second language acquisition, cultural competence, diagnosis and assessment). Professional development opportunities need to be made affordable and accessible to practicing teachers and teacher assistants. Options for electronic delivery and self-study should be explored. Incentives to encourage teachers to engage in ESL professional development opportunities should be explored (e.g., bursaries).

Note: Recommendation #5 is supported by Study Participants' Recommendations #9 and #3.





## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNIVERSITIES AND SCHOOL JURISDICTIONS

**Recommendation #6 – Create more opportunities for inclusion of ESL-related courses in teacher education programs and increase placement opportunities for student teachers in schools with large numbers of ESL students.**

### Rationale:

Predictive analysis findings from this study indicate that a positive relationship exists between more highly qualified and trained staff and improvements in academic achievement by ESL students. Research also supports this finding. Data from case studies and experts/stakeholders indicate that pre-service teachers are limited in the number and breadth of ESL-related courses that can be included in their undergraduate programs. Further, data indicate that schools with large numbers of ESL students are reluctant to take on the responsibility of student teachers given the added burden on ESL teachers.

To address the shortage of teachers who are skilled and qualified in ESL, universities and school jurisdictions should engage in discussions with Alberta Education and Advanced Education and possibly other Ministries to examine the creation of appropriate programs and possibly additional placement opportunities for undergraduate students who are interested in pursuing programs in ESL. This would align with the province's strategy of supporting immigrants and immigration to Alberta.

Additionally, incentives may need to be developed for schools with large numbers of ESL students to accommodate student teachers and, with the university, derive mutual benefit from that involvement.

Note: Recommendation #6 is supported by Study Participants' Recommendations #3 and #12.

**Recommendation #7 – Develop a research agenda that addresses priority questions and issues related to ESL in Alberta.**

### Rationale:

Data from this study indicate that Canadian-born ESL students are not achieving as well as foreign-born ESL students. This situation is untenable for Alberta and for Canada. Further research needs to be conducted to understand why Canadian-born ESL students are achieving at lower levels than their foreign-born counterparts, and why they are leaving the system earlier.

Currently, no schools report following ESL students who leave school early. Alberta-based research provides some insight into reasons for early leaving. This and other important questions need to be addressed and may form a research agenda that could also include, for example:

- Comparison of various instructional strategies across jurisdictions linked to achievement of ESL students;



- Development of diagnostic and assessment tools and processes normed on Alberta students;
- Identification of diagnostic and assessment tools and processes for ESL students with special needs; and
- Longitudinal tracking of ESL students related to employment.

Note: Recommendation #7 is supported by Study Participants' Recommendations #4 and #11.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVANCED EDUCATION AND ALBERTA EDUCATION**

**Recommendation #8 – Explore transition options for ESL students to complete high school requirements.**

### Rationale:

Many ESL students require an additional year(s) beyond the age of 20 to complete diploma requirements. Consideration should be given to creating a mechanism that supports continuous enrolment of ESL students in a high school or post-secondary settings to allow them time to complete high school and to avoid the current year-long wait ESL students experience as they transition from high school to post-secondary institutions.

Note: Recommendation #8 is supported by Study Participants' Recommendation #13.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on a needs assessment study to identify the current state of affairs with respect to K-12 English as a Second Language (ESL) in Alberta, Howard Research suggested eight recommendations for improving the ESL program in the Alberta education system. In addition to the eight recommendations, there were a number of key findings from the study. Stakeholders/experts expressed concerns with existing assessment tools and called for Alberta-normed tools to be developed. The need for consistency in intake assessment was also emphasized to facilitate common placement practices. Leadership strategies and developing strategies that support teachers in their efforts to improve instructional capacity demonstrates good leadership practice and were noted as being key. Important findings in the literature indicate that full integration of ESL students into mainstream classes, if done too early, can be detrimental to the achievement of ESL students. Another key factor related to the achievement of ESL students in the education system is the pre-service training of teachers. Teachers need training in language acquisition, cultural competence, differentiated instruction and ESL assessment. Finally, although no survey questions addressed the topic, ESL students leaving early can be attributed primarily to lack of time to complete high school, frustration and low self-esteem, and family responsibilities.

While this synopsis identifies the key findings from this study, the comprehensive nature of this study necessitated a highly detailed two-part presentation. The full report contains: 1) Synthesis of Results and Recommendations which is the subject of this



report, and 2) a set of K-12 ESL Study Appendices containing individual components of the study each as its own stand-alone report: Literature Review, Case Studies, Predictive Analysis, and Technical Report Data Tables (Descriptive Analysis). The full report as well as a set of Appendices containing other materials such as instruments used for data collection purposes is available in PDF format at <http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/ipr/eslreview>

